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AUTHOR Eddy, Gary
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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to teach a writing course that attempts to accomplish what great poetry accomplishes: the transformation of reality through language. The application of the principles of critical literacy, as outlined by Paulo Freire, may provide some assistance. In this course learners are asked to address problems in their environment and correct them through audience-intensive, purposeful writing assignments. Problems encountered in teaching such a course to First World learners include: (1) the difficulty American learners have in imagining oppression and seeing it in their own surroundings; (2) self-development as a component of self-empowerment; and (3) the principles of turning the classroom over to the learners themselves. Writers and teachers must come to view their work as an act of soul, a meeting of the inner and outer psychological worlds. In this way teaching and writing are both political acts and acts of psychic growth. (RAE)

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Dr. Gary Eddy
Department of English
Winona State University
Winona MN 55987

A Poet Teaches Composition

This paper deals with the difficulties of teaching a writing course that attempts to accomplish what great poetry accomplishes: the transformation of reality through language. In it, I discuss the application of the principles of critical literacy, as outlined by Friere, in a composition course. I briefly sketch a course that asks learners to address problems in their environment and correct them through audience-intensive, purposeful writing assignments.

I go on from there to discuss the problems that I have encountered in teaching such a course to First World learners. These include: the difficulty American learners have in imagining oppression and seeing it in their own surroundings, self-development as a

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component of self-empowerment, and the principles of turning the classroom over to the learners themselves.

The paper arrives at the conclusion that writers and teachers must come to view their work as an act of soul, a meeting of the inner and outer psychological worlds. In this way are teaching and writing both political acts and acts of psychic growth.

Gary Eddy
Department of English
Winona State University
Winona MN 55987

A Poet Teaches Composition

I came to composition much as I came to earn my doctoral degree, by default not by design. I went to college to learn whatever would make me a better poet. After I got my M.F.A., I was over-qualified for most jobs and under-qualified for most jobs in construction. So, I went back to school.

I wanted to teach the poetry workshops, the Whitman seminars, the contemporary literature courses, and all I got was composition (with a couple of exceptions). Two courses a semester, aims and modes, Sheridan Baker, essay models, I current-traditional paradigmed them into submission. Sure, I got a Rhetoric course as an M.A. student and a bit of program indoctrination at another school, but nobody ever told me that composition can be the most politically significant and professionally rewarding endeavor in education. I had to find that out through a long string of failures that were on the verge of turning me against freshmen forever, sabotaging my teaching evaluations (and so, nearly my status at universities), and scaring me away from the profession. Nobody told me a lot of things.

For all the current bantering of the phrase "start where the students are," that did not seem to be policy applied to grad

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students at any of the three universities I attended. And I would probably not be corrected by any of my creative writing peers if I were to include them in that experience.

We Creative Writing types can bring some special attitudes to composition classes. The first of which is: revision is a condition of being, not a stage in the process. Few people are as enthusiastic as writers are about good writing. Conversely, few people are as humbled by it (students love this). And they believe, or why else would they be where they are, that writing can change one's life. Auden's admonishment of Yeats' activism, "Poetry makes nothing happen," notwithstanding, perhaps a poet in the service of literacy just might be able to make things happen in the world.

When I began to study Rhetoric and Composition Theory as a Ph.D. student, I thought of it as a concession to the realities of the job market. What I found over the years of researching and applying in the classroom was a way to tie this teaching of writing together with the other work I do, a way to make teaching a poetic endeavor, a way to help make writing that matters, that transforms reality rather than simply describing it.

As a poet, I believe that everything is subject to transformation through language. My own experience is most often what is tranformed. The imagination turns a couple of hills and a high prarie outside of Flagstaff into its stage, and a man gone sour on love looks long at a bald eagle and begins to grow back the wings on his spirit. Daily life--squabbles, birdsongs,

memories--are all changed from what they are into art that tries simply to tell the part of the world that's listening: okay, keep swimming, we'll get there.

Well, the learners in my classes are part of that world. They have their own cultural and personal values that shape their relationship to that larger society. Likewise the society's values actively welcome or exclude them. And my deepest belief is that their values can change the world. But they don't often agree at first. So my goal is to help them acquire the tools for transforming their experience and their environment. To that end, I favor this statement by David Bartholomae:

> The key to an effective pedagogy is a sequence of instruction that allows students to experience the possiblities for contextualizing a given writing situation in their own terms, terms that would allow them to initiate and participate in the process by which they and their subject are transformed (87).

And this process is described in many places by Paolo Freire as critical literacy, a way of problematizing the learner's societal relationships and discovering how those relationships can be shifted or changed. And the first of these is the most crucial, and the one the interests me most as a poet: the learner's relationship to his language.

I start every semester by drawing a circle drawn on the board with a dot in its center. "This is society," I say. "Who's in the middle?" After they decide who's where in the circle, from CEO's to illegal immigrants, I ask them where they think <u>they</u> are. Usually, they place themselves somewhere just inside, as if they saw themselves on a journey to that center. When I ask them why

so far from the center, they talk about highschool diplomas, the fact that they can read and write, but that they're in college and don't have real jobs. How do they plan to get closer to the center? Money. How will they get money? Get real jobs, be entrepreneurs.

And it is just this word "real" that excites the discussion. What do they mean by real job, real world, real life? Isn't it precisely that they can choose a "real" job over one less real, like their work-study or McDonald's job, that they can choose an "un-real" life like college, that places them inside the circle at all?

Through examining these choices and the relationships with authority and institutions that they include, we proceed to discover how language affects their lives. And, most importantly, how they can use language to change their condition and make things real in the old sense: take an idea and situate it in the social, political, and economic contexts of their world. Act on it in language.

So, my intent is to draw students into the academic discourse community by leading them through thestages of that discourse that Bartholomae and Petrosky describe in Facts, Counterfacts, and Artifacts: forming generalizations, comparing generalizations, and arriving at theory. But, in addition, I hope to take learners into practice. The course I've been developing builds on classroom dialogue to identify problems in the learners' environment that can be addressed by writing. After they pose the

problem in context and study it, they then write scenarios that outline the invidual's relationships to the relevant institutions and create writing assignments that can bring the learners into confrontation with those institutions to effect change. They make their audiences real ones, with names and official responsibilities to the institutions they represent. Their projects must be reifiable, and learners must attempt all the writing that would address their chosen problem. Learners generate the problem, learners analyze the problem, learners create the solution in rhetorically circumscribed documents. And when they make the connection that language has a powerful and inhering reality, they can begin to take themselves seriously and address the politics of discourse communities and the oppressive power communities that coagulate in and around social institutions.

The results are very pleasing. Some of the projects generated have been AIDS Information Clearinghouses for county health organizations, anorexia-bulimia support groups, suicide prevention hotlines. And my classes come to see that writing can serve as a vehicle for social empowerment. They can literally see the value of writing in action. That is, if they <u>put</u> writing into action. Most students will treat their projects solely as thought experiments, perhaps through apathy, perhaps through a deep seated belief that their own powerlessness is stronger than their will to overcome it. And maybe they're right.

Any liberation pedagogy is problematical in a First World

nation. In our society the most oppressed often don't see their oppressor. They are victimized by abstractions: poverty, racism, "the man." They don't conceptualize the problem as a legitimized, empowered system of individuals with names and faces, who benefit materially by participating in oppression. Thus, they cannot discern readily their relationship to their opressor, except through a central figurehead like Ronald Reagan. But he is not their problem, not directly anyway. Their central problematic is language itself.

When I see learners who are at once victims of language and users of language, I think of Goethe saying, "In order to do something one has to be someone." Denise Levertov explains this statement by pointing to the "necessity for self-development" in those who would be active (65). And this is the problem with the kind of class I am teaching. Learners are acting because a course requires they do, or are acting out of an impulse that they do not trace to its source within themselves. When Freire calls for more than just action but reflection on action, this may be what he means for our First World learners. They must first examine their own values and determine how any action can be central to their lives as thinking adults. They must examine their compromises and their goals and see that their studies as well as their actions are part of a process of becoming individuals.

Teaching writing-as-empowerment involves a radically alternative pedagogy. And I don't have the answers. Worse yet, nobody does. But I think the first step must be to turn as much of

the real power of the classroom as possible over to the learners. In coming semesters I will attempt to more completely restructure the power and authority of my own classroom to accomplish the following:

1) learners articulate their values
2) the goal of the course is determined by these values
3) the learners articulate their needs and classtime is shaped to address them
4) the knowledge of the learners will be validated by the group and the instructor
5) the learners choose the issues that they will address in writing assigments of their own device
6) the classroom will become a laboratory for testing the transformations that students generate to assist their development into self-reliant, intellectually independent members of a community.

Encouraging learners to enter discourse communities like academia is a self-interested act. We believe in the discourse because it is a choice we ourselves have made. That choice helped us to thrive. We like it, we see how it can help others. However, to so generalize is risky, but to not help supply a doorway to such communities puts our very function into question.

And to complicate the matter further, the structure of any American classroom is imbued with the chauvinism of a teacher, like myself, who has been even moderately successful in the educational, political, and economic institutions. My presence

alone enforces in learners the assumptions that their success depends upon mastery of relevant discourse systems, the keys to which can be traced to my white-maleness relative to a white male power system. Or to the learner's self-limiting belief that the teacher is somehow special, smarter, given breaks, born to authority. The message this alone sends to the Black, twenty-two-year-old mother of three who works full time and has come to my class in order to improve her living condition and that of her children is disheartening.

And when we turn the authority over to the students, they are immediately intimidated by such power and feel incapable of doing anything constructive with it. This is in part attributable to the "banking theory" education that's been imposed on them, which keeps them passive before authority. Though, indeed, determining one's own agenda is something possible only in the "unreal" world of the classroom. But it can force students to ask the questions that will continue to spark their education and their self-discovery: What do I really want to learn? Why? How can I find it? What is it good for?

The first step, for me, is to allow the students to draw from their ranks representatives who will work with me to construct the syllabus, to determine course goals and ways to achieve those goals, to facilitate class plans and dialogue, and to help me determine course effectiveness. I have adapted this from the example Michael Holzman presents in his article in the February 88 College English, "A Post-Freirean Model for Adult Literacy

Education"(177-89), of the Maryknolls who let their literacy teachers rise from the people who were being taught. But this motion, alone, will not fix the dilemma we face in the classroom in making writing a tool for social empowerment while imparting to learners effective strategies for the rhetorical scene and enforcing (and questioning the politics of) the rigors of Standard Written English. But the effort we expend in turning the classroom over to the learners will magnify the motivation of students and keep our jobs perpetually interesting by keeping our duties variable.

When the student population has become as diverse as it has in U.S. higher education--and it will only become more diverse--it is utterly impractical to maintain the role of banker in the writing classroom, filling the empty accounts. And as Freire has critiqued this model of education, so have practitioners of his model supplemented his by doing whatever is possible to de-emphasize the role of the expert in the classroom. As Holzman so readily points out, "People value what they themselves have achieved" (187), and this will add to the value our students place on the education of their children and their children and theirs.

Poetry has been a powerful motivator in helping me become a teacher. Fighting with Auden was the first spark, but my own writing and wrestling with the authority of language and discourse has pushed me further. Believing that the outward transformation of experience and environment means nothing without a

corresponding inner transformation has kept my teaching in a state of perpetual revision. As Novalis has said, "The seat of the soul is where the inner world and the outer world meet. Where they overlap, it is in every point of the overlap"(66). Writing must be, for us, and especially for the learners in our classes, an act of the soul.

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